

Sunday 25 February, 2018 (Second Sunday of Lent)

St Andrew's Church, Cobham

Genesis 17.1-17, 15-16; Romans 4.13-end; Mark 8.31-end

How to deny yourself (hint: it's not about the chocolate)

Have you ever read something that stopped you dead in your tracks? It happened to me other day. It was a quote, I think from the Archbishop of Canterbury, but I can't be sure. It said: *'What better thing could you do with your life than to follow Jesus?'*

I've been a Christian for a while now and yet it still struck me forcefully. Seeing it in black and white just crystalized it for me: really, *what better thing can we do with our lives than to follow Jesus?*

As followers of Christ we have everything, don't we? In fact, let's just think about it for a moment; let me ask you all – what is it that we get from following Christ?

- We are accepted into God's arms like little children, loved and protected forever;
- Community, a world-wide family;
- Moral direction;
- Forgiveness when we stray;
- When things are dark and painful, we have the comfort of knowing that it is only a passing thing, and one day we will live forever with God in peace and joy.
- Meaning and purpose;
- *Love, joy, peace, truth and beauty in a world made sacred. Praise God!*

What could be better than that?

A fat bank account? Power? The corner office? The freedom to indulge our baser instincts?

(Actually, I must admit, there was a moment the other day when I thought it might be quite nice not to be a Christian just for a moment, so I could give a very rude guy in the traffic an equally rude gesture! But it was a fleeting moment.)

What better thing could we do with our life than to follow Christ?

But it's a great sadness that so many people in our secularized western world today are prevented from seeing this great truth.

Why is that? What stops them from seeing it?

Of course, there are many people who have been hurt and betrayed by the church and have turned away from it, as a result. And who can blame them?

One of the difficulties is that so many of our thinkers and intellectuals in western society have declared that Christianity is irrational, unscientific and bigoted, and if you become a Christian it is because you are either dim or weak.

For example, Bertrand Russell, the famous philosopher and atheist, was once asked what he would say if he discovered after death that God existed. He replied that he would excuse himself to God by saying 'Not enough evidence, God, not enough evidence!'

This thinking then spreads from our universities into commentary in the media, and people sort of absorb it by osmosis, without really thinking about it. They might even think of themselves as spiritual in some sense, but think of Christianity as being anti-spiritual.

But in the course of my studies and my reading, and from speaking to many people about faith and what it means, I have come to suspect that the real reason for rejecting Jesus is not intellectual superiority, or a lack of evidence.

At rock bottom, I think there is one, and one thing only, that really stops people from answering the call to follow Jesus. What's more, it even stops many Christians from deepening their faith.

What could that thing be?

Jesus tells us in our reading this morning.

He said this: *'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,'* (Mark 8.34).

In other words, to get hold of the beautiful life, we first have to give something up. And that something is ourselves!

But what does Jesus mean by saying we must deny ourselves?

I can tell you what he *doesn't* mean.

- He doesn't mean that we have to force ourselves to be good even when we don't feel like it.
- He doesn't mean that we must deny ourselves pleasures and comfort.
- He definitely doesn't mean that we must give up chocolate for Lent.

Jesus does not tell us to *torment* the poor self. It's not about using our willpower to make ourselves unselfish.

What he means is that we have to simply *let go* of the self, to *abandon* it to God. We received it from God, and if we want it to be what it is meant to be, we have to give it back to him.

If we want to follow Jesus where he wants to take us, into the heart of God, we have to get rid of any desire to be in control of our own lives. We must let God be the boss of our plans, our hopes, our fears, our money, our sex lives, our time, our relationships, our thoughts, our pleasures – everything.

There is a wonderful line from the great preacher on the spiritual life, Oswald Chambers. He said this: '*Beware of refusing to go to the funeral of your own independence,*' ('My Utmost for His Highest', 12/9). If we want to follow Jesus, I mean *really* follow him, we first must go to the funeral of our own independence.

This is a hard thing to do. This, I believe, is what underlies so much of the resistance to the truth in Christianity among our intellectuals. This is what poor Peter had to learn when he tried to persuade Jesus to go for glory instead of death, and earned that very sharp rebuke, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!' (Mark 8.33).

It is a hard thing, yes, especially at first. It may be scary. But the alternative is not good. We could gain the world – get that corner office or the new Ferrari - but lose our soul, and what would be the gain in that? If we don't deny ourselves, we are lost: '[W]hoever wants to save his life will lose it,' said Jesus [Mark 8.35a].

The alternative is dreadful, but the rewards! The rewards are infinite: Jesus promised us '[W]hoever loses his life for me will find it,' [Mark 8.35b]. We may have to abandon our lives to Jesus but when we do, we discover a far greater, much more precious life, the one we were created to have – eternal life with

God. God gave us our lives, and when we give them back to him, we discover the true and beautiful life.

Truly, what better thing can we do with our lives than to follow Jesus?

In closing I invite you to join me in this prayer, which comes from the Methodist Covenant Service:

Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing, put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted or brought low for you;

let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing;

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

Now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.